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ABSTRACT

The Spirit of Democracy Project was initiated in 2000 by the University of New Brunswick (Canada) Faculty of Education in partnership with the Russian Association for Civic Education, and was made possible through financial contribution from the Canadian International Development Agency. The focus of the Project is the development of online citizenship education curriculum resources for use by teachers in Russia and Canada. The Canadian and Russian project teams are developing materials for similar topics based on local content. Researchers, on both sides, create learning opportunities using situations and springboards. The situations present democratic issues and concepts, for example, the value of loyalty, or the meaning of privacy. An important role in the Project is assigned to visual materials and creative use of hypermedia. The Project led to close collaboration between Russian and Canadian social sciences researchers, teachers and students. (Contains 10 references.) (Author)

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Using the Web to Teach Democracy

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Abstract: The Spirit of Democracy Project was initiated in 2000 by the University of New Brunswick, Canada, Faculty of Education in partnership with the Russian Association for Civic Education, and was made possible through financial contribution from the Canadian International Development Agency. The focus of the Project is the development of online citizenship education curriculum resources for use by teachers in Russia and Canada. The Canadian and Russian project teams are developing materials for similar topics based on local content. Researchers, on both sides, create learning opportunities using situations and springboards. The situations present democratic issues and concepts, for example the value of loyalty, or the meaning of privacy. An important role in the Project is assigned to visual materials and creative use of hypermedia. The Project led to close collaboration between Russian and Canadian social sciences researchers, teachers and students.

Introduction

The Spirit of Democracy Project began in the summer of 2000. The project was initiated by the University of New Brunswick, Canada, Faculty of Education, Citizenship Education Research and Development Group, in partnership with the Russian Association for Civic Education and Uchitelskaya Gazeta, and was made possible through financial contribution from the Canadian International Development Agency.

The organizing idea for this project was born several years ago during a meeting of two Canadian researchers, Andrew Hughes and Alan Sears in a discussion with colleagues from Argentina on the topic of helping to foster the emerging democratic culture in that country. The Argentinean colleagues said: "Don't teach us the structures of democracy, we know all about the structures of democracy; teach us the spirit of democracy" (The Spirit of Democracy 2002a). In the summer of 2000 Russian and Canadian teams for the Spirit of Democracy project met for the first time in Canada to discuss how they are going to teach "the spirit of democracy".

The goal of this project is to help Russian educators to develop a new dynamic approach to citizenship education in public schools. The main focus of the Project, from the beginning, was on the development of online curriculum resources on the "spirit of democracy" for use by teachers in Russia and Canada. The approaches used to convey "the spirit of democracy" include blended learning, situated learning, and creative use of Web media to effectively teach democracy on the Web. A lot of effort has been put into making the Project site a truly democratic learning environment, including links to national and international democratic sources.

Nurturing the Spirit of Democracy

Web-Based Situated Learning Approach

The Spirit of Democracy project is using the Web to deliver online resources: content, instructions, along with a discussion environment for teachers and students. These curriculum resources can be used as a complete set of materials or as individual lesson topics for different subjects such as Social Studies, History, Citizenship Education, etc. The Canadian and Russian project teams are developing

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project materials for similar topics based on local content. As a result, the information presented on the Canadian site is relevant to the lives of young Canadians, and the content on the Russian site may differ and is relevant to the lives of Russian students.

Web media by its nature is the most democratic type of media and is ideally suited for conveying the "spirit of democracy " idea. Web-based studies immerse students in an online learning environment that allows them to access all original materials, even those provided for teachers. The Web also serves as a unique source of "live" information. By providing hypertext links to government organizations, international organizations, educational Web sites, and online magazines, The Spirit of Democracy learning materials are always up-to date and offer information on recent important developments in the area of Citizenship and Social Studies in Canada, Russia and all over the world. In this paper the author is using the Web media definition from Huss (1999), where the Web media is defined as the use of the text, images, animations, sounds and video on the Web, supported by Hypertext Markup Language (HTML).

Combined with the creative use of multimedia and hypermedia Web based learning offers unique opportunities for educators. The Spirit of Democracy Project's learning approach is based on the ideas of Lev Semenovich Vygotsky who is widely known as "The Mozart of Psychology". Vygotsky, along with Piaget and Bruner developed the foundation for the concepts of Situated Learning and Anchored Instruction (The Spirit of Democracy 2002b). The Situated Learning approach is based on Situated Cognition Theory that suggests that learning is tied to authentic activity, context and culture (Brown et al. 1989). "An authentic context for citizenship learning must be a situation in which "real" citizens might be required to think and to act. It can be current, historical, or both; it can be near or far in both time and place" (Hughes et al. 2000). The Spirit of Democracy Project provides teachers and students with a wide range of "real life" situations. The Project is using a "blended learning" approach in which teachers use online materials in combination with conventional classroom training.

Use of visuals and Web media

Within The Spirit of Democracy Project, developers, on both sides, create learning opportunities using situations and springboards (anchors). The situations present democratic issues and concepts, for example the value of loyalty, or the meaning of privacy. The uniqueness of the approach taken by the Spirit of Democracy project is that researchers use authentic materials to involve students in learning and discovery. A very important role is assigned to visual materials. The situation is usually presented to students by showing a sequence of 8-10 pictures. The pictures should be descriptive enough to tell the story and appealing enough to draw the students in to a discussion about a particular topic. To achieve these results, the project illustrator has to work closely with researchers to portray the situations they want to use.

The topic of "Privacy" is a good example of such joint work between a researcher and an illustrator. One of the scenarios dealing with the topic of "Legal Aspects of Privacy" involves a discussion on the case of unreasonable search and seizure (Mr. Bagnell's case). In the learning activity "You Be the Judge" students need to learn all the details of the case and make a legal judgment (The Spirit of Democracy 2002c). The factual materials of the case are presented as a series of illustrations that lead students through the sequence of events of the actual case (Figure 1). One of the important conditions of this activity is to create a simulation of the court environment and help students experience the process of rendering a fair judgment. The use of visuals here is much more appropriate than the use of newspaper or magazine articles. Such articles usually contain judgmental opinions that may influence students' decisions one way or another. The researcher needed to spend a considerable amount of time working with the illustrator on the details of each scene, making sure that it properly presents all the facts of the case without any additional visual information that might influence students' opinion.

Along with the visual story presented through illustrations, the hypertext links allow students to learn the facts of the case and get additional supportive information, such as, excerpts from the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Controlled drugs and Substances Act, excerpts from precedents that deal with search and seizure cases and from the Privacy Act of New Brunswick, and a discussion of reasonable grounds. It is interesting to mention that our Russian colleagues are having a difficult time translating the word "privacy" as there is no equivalent in the Russian language. Currently in Russia people are using the English word "privacy" to convey the correct meaning of the concept. The idea of having a Privacy Commissioner is also something unheard of in Russian society.

Figure 1: Mr. Bagnell's case

Another set of illustrations was created for the "Images of Chile" springboard that is used to initiate students' discussion about "due process" and, in particular, human rights violations as one of the most important aspects of this concept (Figure 2). Working closely with a researcher, an illustrator portrays the story of a person missing after a confrontation with Chilean police. The visual story is supported by several hyperlinks to the Amnesty International Web site with articles about human rights violations in different countries such as Cuba, Guatemala, Bosnia and to the UN's Commission on Human Rights Web site.

Figure 2: Images of Chile

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Students are presented with images and asked to discuss what fundamental rights have been violated, how the due process of law could be properly applied in this situation, and what are the basic differences between a democratic country and dictatorial regime.

One more example of using images, creatively, to engage students in discussion about democratic issues, like "Freedom of religion", is an interactive presentation of the famous Russian painting "Boyarynya Morozova" by Surikov (The Spirit of Democracy 2002d). In this painting the artist depicts Feodosiya Morozova, who was an active supporter of the old-believer movement in the Russian church, and a crowd made up of vivid individuals. The image map of the painting is hyperlinked to the close-ups of the individual characters portrayed by the painter. During the class discussion the teacher can, using this interactive image, focus student's attention on different human faces in this complex masterpiece portraying a whole range of attitudes towards religion. This helps to initiate a class discussion about a real historical event and how different people with their own beliefs and values view this event.

The use of multimedia capabilities in this international project is heavily restricted by bandwidth limitations on the Russian partners' side. Russian schools, especially in rural areas, have very slow Internet connections. Due to these bandwidth limitations, in some cases video clips on springboards had to be substituted by a sequence of compressed images and songs were replaced by text. However, the Russian government is currently implementing reforms that encourage the use of modern telecommunications technologies (Filippov, 1999) and the above limitations will soon disappear, allowing a full range of multimedia capabilities.

Interface design and translation tools

It is important to mention a special approach in interface design utilized by The Spirit of Democracy Project. The majority of graphic navigation elements were intentionally designed as hypertext links and not as images. This approach allows the use of automatic translation tools to translate not only the content of individual web pages, but also the navigational elements, thus allowing international users access to the entire content of the Canadian Web site. In the future, with the development of the automatic translation technology, the content of the entire Project site, including Russian web pages, will be available for international users. However, even today, using the Web based automatic translation engine, we provide an option to translate Canadian pages into four languages such as French, Spanish, German and Italian.

The quality of the automatic translation is reasonable, for example the French translation was evaluated and found to be of acceptable quality. However, this is not the case with all languages. For example, when using the service in Spanish, the word "Spirit" in the phrase "Spirit of Democracy" gets translated to the word "alcohol". We believe that, in the future, with the development of better translation tools, these problems will be solved.

It is worthwhile to mention collaborative idea, used in the design a site map, for the Project Web site. In fact, there are two different site maps, for Russian and Canadian sections. Each navigational map provides hyperlinks not only to local pages, but also allows users to navigate the counterpart site, e.g. Canadian site map provides links not only to Canadian pages, but also helps Canadian users navigate the Russian content, and vice versa. This allows users with limited knowledge of a foreign language to explore content on the "foreign" Web site.

Cultural and Copyright issues

This International Web project did not escape certain cultural issues. Most of the issues were related to the Web site design and project logo. At the beginning of the project it was decided that both teams, Russian and Canadian, would develop their own content. In the first three moths of the project a question was raised about designing a logo. The process of logo design is a good illustration of the complex relationship between the two teams. The Project asked a Canadian graphic artist to design a logo for the Spirit of Democracy project. The artist created the first logo based on the existing Russian interpretation of democratic symbols (Figure 3, a). This logo was discussed during the meetings of the Canadian team and was rejected as being not a "true North American democratic symbol" and also having nothing to do with Russia. A second attempt produced a logo that used an image of the Russian "White House" (former

parliament building) as a symbol of democracy (Figure 3.b). This logo was accepted by Canadian team, but strongly rejected by Russian team members. Russians argued that government buildings in Russian culture are not associated with symbols of democracy. Finally, the artist created the third version of the Project logo by removing all imagery and blending two national flags in one image with typography as a main graphic element (Figure 3, c). Both teams accepted this logo as a working draft.

a b c

Figure 3 : The project logo

Digital Copyright laws in Canada and Russia are different. It is a challenging issue for our Project. So far we are working under the model that all Canadian materials will conform to Canadian digital copyright law, and Russian materials will conform to Russian copyright laws. According to our Russian colleagues, Russian copyright law permits use of any digital materials for educational purposes. What if they decide to use some copyrighted North American materials on the Russian Web site? What copyright law will cover this case?

International collaboration

One of the advantages achieved during the current phase of the project is the creation of working links between Canadian and Russian researchers, teachers, and even students. The links between researchers and teachers, in both countries, began to develop as a result of seminars conducted by Canadian and Russian team members for teachers in Canada and Russia. During the seminars conducted by Canadian researchers in Moscow, Orel and Samara for a total of eighty Russian teachers in the summer of 2001, ten Russian teachers-leaders and their schools were selected for pilot participation in the project. These teachers will receive further training in Canada in the fall of 2002 and will be able to train others in the field of citizenship education. Specialized training, for Russian team members, in web site maintenance and development, will assure that Russian teachers will be able to build upon project outputs and online training materials. Teacher-leaders in the regions of Moscow, Orel and Samara have already conducted their own seminars for other new teachers and for regional school board authorities on the Spirit of Democracy, resulting in materials being incorporated into the curriculum in some areas.

Canadian teachers from all regions of New Brunswick attended a seminar at the University of New Brunswick in November of 2001 on the Spirit of Democracy's educational online materials. After this seminar, teachers of the Superior Middle School in Bathurst, New Brunswick became interested in learning about Russia and currently are working with their administration on development of an integrated curriculum unit that incorporates the study of Russia into all Grade 6 subject areas for one semester. As a result, a strong connection has developed between Bathurst Middle School in Canada and Zelenograd School #1194 in Russia. Canadian students became interested in learning more about Russia, and in exploring issues in the project and communicating with Russian students, and numerous students signed up

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for the School's Human Right's Club. With the help of their teachers, students of both countries began to communicate with each other and exchanged photograph albums, drawings, and information about themselves and their communities (The Spirit of Democracy, 2002e). The design of the project Web site supports collaboration between students allowing them to participate in online discussions on the Project's discussion board on different topics related to democracy and citizenship. On the discussion board students can write messages in their own language and also follow threads in other languages. However, in order for the discussion board to be an active forum, day-to-day attention and monitoring are required, which was not anticipated in the initial funding proposal.

Conclusions

After two years we can already call this project a success – the Russian team, participating in the project, have developed and posted on the Project Web site more than 50 different topics related to citizenship and democracy, and the Canadian team posted about 30 such topics (The Spirit of Democracy 2002f). Researchers and schoolteachers develop these topics collaboratively. Project materials posted on the Web have already been successfully used by Canadian and Russian teachers in a classroom environment and received positive responses. Several participating Canadian and Russian schools are using project Web-based resources to conduct classes and educate youngsters on democratic values and the spirit of democracy. Currently both, Canadian and Russian teams continue to develop new cases and are planning to meet in the fall of 2002 to discuss their progress and plans for the second phase of the project.

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